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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA CHARM OFFENSIVE -- MEETING WITH
COMMUNICATION MINISTER

Classified By: Amb. William R. Brownfield for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Acting on GoV instructions, Venezuelan Minister of Communication Andres Izarra met with the Ambassador March 23. Izarra suggested cooperation on journalist exchanges, an idea which the Ambassador found lacking for among other reasons, the Minister's severe public criticism of U.S. journalists. The Ambassador told Izarra that both sides had to accept that we have areas of disagreement, adding that we would state our disagreements clearly and publicly. He also told the Minister we would not accept limited channels of communication nor pay silence on core issues as a price for those channels. The Izarra meeting was one more episode in the GoV's recent, plainly tactical, mini-charm offensive. To our advantage, it and any others that may arise will be opportunities to highlight our willingness to discuss and resolve issues, while blunting possible attempts by President Hugo Chavez to claim we are unwilling to talk or to play down fundamental differences between us. End Summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador met one-on-one for breakfast with Minister of Communication Andres Izarra March 23. Izarra reached out and proposed the meeting a week in advance. Ambassador deferred on the first two proposed dates, and accepted the third. Izarra opened by reporting that his instructions were to establish a better channel of communication. He suggested Ministry of Communication and Embassy could work jointly on some journalist exchanges between Venezuela and the U.S.

3. (C) The Ambassador agreed that communication was important. This had been his message since arriving in September 2004, he told Izarra. But both sides had to accept that there were important areas where we had fundamental disagreements, and it appeared that those disagreements were not going to disappear. Where we differed on issues of democracy, or foreign policy, or law, the Ambassador noted, we would state our disagreements clearly and publicly. He emphasized that we would not accept channels of communication with the GOV if the price is silence on fundamental areas of importance to the GOV. In addition, when we had military, law enforcement, or intelligence issues to discuss, we would only discuss them through military, law enforcement, or intelligence channels. We would not limit all government-government communication to the Foreign Ministry. Izarra accepted this approach without comment.

4. (C) Izarra noted that in his previous conversation with Ambassador (nearly four months ago), we had discussed possibility of outreach to Venezuelan journalists and Ministry of Communication officials to visit the U.S. Izarra was skeptical, believing that such visits might merely be indoctrination trips by the USG. Nevertheless, he was ready to explore the idea, with understanding that we would invite U.S. journalists to Venezuela for reciprocal visits to poor Venezuelan communities where they might witness the GOV social missions. Ambassador asked if Izarra was talking about inviting USG officials, or private journalists; he said journalists. Ambassador asked if Izarra envisioned directly inviting U.S. journalists to Venezuela, or wanted the invitations to be issued by the USG; Izarra said he wanted them to go through the USG. Ambassador said it seemed unusual to insert the USG in the middle of an invitation by the GOV to U.S. journalists to visit Venezuela. We would consider the idea, but it did not seem like a strong possibility.

5. (C) Ambassador noted Izarra had been very severe in public on several U.S. journalists based in and accredited to Venezuela. GOV could criticize journalists and their reporting. If, however, they moved to restrict their access, control their reporting, threaten their security, or expel them from Venezuela, then we would have a bilateral issue between the two governments. Izarra said there was no such intention. Several U.S. journalists, particularly the correspondent of the Miami Herald, were consistently and

erroneously critical of the GOV and its policies, Izarra said, and he had a duty to criticize their errors. The Ministry of Communication, he said, was also changing the accreditation badges of foreign journalists to make it easier

for GOV security personnel to differentiate journalists from Ministry employees. Ambassador noted that a critical press was an essential and fundamental element of any democratic society, including the United States. The GOV, he told Izarra, should start to worry about its democratic credentials when the press ceased to be critical. The Ambassador also noted that it was a fair point for the USG to express an opinion in public and open debate.

16. (C) Izarra said that while we were debating, he might mention recent stories (in El Nuevo Herald) about USG investigations of organizations supporting the Bolivarian cause in the U.S. Surely the GOV and its supporters had a right to express their views in the United States? Ambassador said there was no question of right to express views. However, the U.S. was a sovereign nation, like Venezuela, and advocacy organizations had to obey U.S. law. He reminded Izarra that organizations representing a foreign government had to register under the FARA; organizations claiming tax-exempt status had to engage in activities consistent with that IRS status; radio stations had to hold valid broadcast licenses; and demonstrators on public property had to obtain permits. Assuming all GoV supporters were operating consistently with U.S. law, the Ambassador said, they had nothing to worry about. If not, then they were in violation of U.S. law. Izarra assured the Ambassador that the Venezuela Information Office and the GoV legal representatives in the U.S. were in strict compliance with U.S. law.

17. (C) Izarra asked if Embassy planned to make public comment on the current discussions between Exxon-Mobil and the Ministry of Energy on their dispute over royalties. Ambassador said Exxon-Mobil had asked us not to make public comment, so we would not. If, in the future, they were to ask us to make public comment, the Ambassador said, we probably would. Izarra said this issue should be left in private channels. Talking about the case publicly (COMMENT: The local press carried a brief story on the subject that morning) would complicate the negotiations.

18. (C) As breakfast concluded, Izarra noted again GOV concern over recent comments on a Miami television station by a former USG official that in GOV judgment encouraged coup plotting in Venezuela. Ambassador said he had reviewed the transcript of the interview. He was not a legal or constitutional expert, he told Izarra, but he seriously doubted that the language came anywhere near prohibited speech in the U.S. Free speech was free speech: Sometimes you agreed with it, and sometimes you did not. If the language was not criminal in nature, U.S. law enforcement was not going to restrict it. Izarra acknowledged their U.S. legal representatives had reviewed the tape as well, and reached the same conclusion. He noted, however, that he was still going to comment on it in public. Ambassador said he would be delighted to say in public what he had just said to Izarra in private.

COMMENT

19. (C) The charm offensive continues. Ambassador handed Izarra several red meat comments, and the minister did not bite. Our judgment is still that the GOV offensive is tactical in nature. We do not want to fall into a tactical trap. If, after seven months of wandering in the desert, they offer us meetings, we will accept. At each encounter, we will emphasize the fundamental areas where we disagree, but express willingness to discuss and resolve issues of importance to the United States. We do not want to give Chavez the opportunity to say that we refuse to meet with his government, but we do not want to allow him to say that we do not have fundamental differences and problems, either. Brownfield